

BICYCLE TRAIN GUIDE



Bicycle trains are groups of students and adults biking to school together. Children get the benefit of practicing their riding skills while supervised by adults. Children can take advantage of the fresh air, exercise, and socialize with friends. Biking on a regular basis increases these benefits significantly.

How does a bicycle train work?

Bicycle trains are simply a group of children and adults riding together, starting from one location. More complex versions include “stops” where the train collects more students and adults along an established route. Either way can be fun and rewarding. Children gain confidence in their riding skills, and parents can see the improvement the children are making.

Things to Consider

- Is the school close enough? (1-2 miles)
- Are there students who have bikes and know how to ride them? (usually these students range from third graders through middle school grades)
- Can you find a route that is comfortable and safe?
 - » Lanes are wide enough for bikes and cars (bike lanes and trails are great, but not required)
 - » Intersections have good sight lines
 - » Stray dogs and crime issues are not present

Getting Started

Start by recruiting some other adults. At the beginning, one or two people are enough. When figuring out your route, you may need to add length to your ride to avoid tricky spots, or to take advantage of comfortable, off-road trails.

Before settling on your starting point (and any “stops” if you’re choosing to have multiple pick-up points) and route hop on your bikes and try it out! Try the routes during the approximate time of day that you plan to ride to school. Weekdays are great times to test your route as weekend traffic might be lighter. It can also be helpful to take the route with a few children, to see how long it takes with younger riders.

Once your route is established, agree on a starting time. It will be important for the team to be ready to leave on time.

The Engineer and The Caboose

Because the participants will likely travel on the road at least some of the way, agree to maintain a single-file line of bikes, with an adult at the front and an adult at the back of the train. With this arrangement, there is an adult leading the train acting as “engineer”, who watches for intersections and leads everyone along the agreed route. The adult in the back functions as a “caboose” keeping track of children and making sure there are no stragglers. A good rule of thumb is to have one adult for every three to six children (depending on the children’s’ ages). If you have more than six children in your train, put some adults interspersed throughout the train to help. Try to have at least one adult who is neither the engineer nor caboose to help assist and children who experience mechanical difficulties.



Establishing Ground Rules

Riding bicycles is fun, but because riders travel in the road, addressing safety is paramount. To make the ride safe and predictable for everyone, have a game plan or set of ground rules for the ride. Below is our suggested list of rules.

- ✓ Only allow children to participate if they have officially joined the group. Having a parent's permission is critical.
- ✓ All riders must wear helmets that are properly fitted.
- ✓ Stay in formation! This means there will always be an adult in the front and the back (engineer and caboose). This also means there is to be no passing. We find it helpful to keep the same order of kids each time your ride. Some trains organize kids by age, alphabetically by first name or height.
- ✓ Keep a safe distance between each rider, but keep pace. Roughly one bicycle length is enough space so that there is not a pile up if the train needs to stop quickly, but not so far that any of bicyclists can get separated or lost. You as an adult will likely need to help remind the young bicyclists of how far that distance is and remind them to maintain it.
- ✓ Obey all traffic laws. Stop for stop signs, stop at red lights, ride only an arm's length from the curb, etc. These are the skills you are passing down to the young bicyclists.
- ✓ Learn the hand signals and use them often. Young bicyclists may have trouble maintaining balance with only one hand on the handle bars. The adults should explain the signals and model them, but don't worry about getting the children to participate too.
- ✓ Wear bright clothing. It would be helpful for all of the adults to wear reflective vests. This increases the visibility of the whole group. Some trains have vests with "Bicycle train" on the back to increase awareness for motorists. Remind children's parents to dress them in bright clothing. Equipping bikes with front and rear reflectors is also a good idea.
- ✓ Communicate with other riders. If you or a child needs to stop, communicate with the other adults that you and the child are hanging back. Everyone should know where everyone else is at all times.
- ✓ Keep it fun! There is no need to race to school. Move at a comfortable pace and enjoy the scenery.
- ✓ Provide the ground rules in writing to the parents of all children participating. It may also be helpful to review the rules regularly with the group's participants.

Train Volunteers

Train all adult participants on safe biking maneuvers. It is easy to get sloppy with hand signaling, stopping at stop signs and other safe but sometimes tedious behaviors. In bicycle trains, adults are modeling safe biking behavior that children will imitate. Make sure everyone is on the same page. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has an online video that can be a good refresher on safe biking for adults: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdrxlpQpt4>

Here are some additional topics to consider:

- How to handle inappropriate child behavior.
- Any supplies or equipment provided such as first aid kits or reflective gear.
- Emergency procedures.
- Have an inclement weather plan. Talk to children about dressing appropriately for rainy or hot days. Talk about weather that would lead to cancelling a ride.
- What to do if a route is blocked
- What to do if the volunteer will be unable to lead the bicycle train on a particular day.
- What to do if a child does not meet the bicycle train as expected.
- Length of time to wait for late arrivals.
- Parent contact information for each child.
- How to track the number of participants.

Keep the Communication Lines Open

Families need to be informed of the walking school bus routes, stops, times, and members, as well as any changes. Regular meetings can help. Websites or online “groups” can also be effective. Everyone needs to know the rules, and should be able to ask questions.

A mechanism for children and their parents to offer feedback. Check-in with participants to see what is working and what can be improved. Some parents may not be able to ride to school, but may have ideas to make the train more visible, or can help secure donations for bells and vests from local bike shops.

Strategies for Promoting Your Bicycle Train

Biking is a fun and social activity. Promoting your bicycle train can be a way to invite more participants or to recognize those who are participating.

- ➔ Write a school newsletter article.
- ➔ Send home letters to neighbors (see the website for a model).
- ➔ Contact your local newspaper.
- ➔ Make an announcement at a PTA or Back to School Night meeting.
- ➔ Send an email to parents or post a message on the school website.
- ➔ Make an announcement at a neighborhood association meeting, or write an article in a local newsletter.

Lessons Learned

Bicycle trains and walking school buses are popping up all over the country. As every place is different, so is every “train”. Here are some lessons that we have learned from bicycle train organizers.

- Recruit as many adult volunteers as you can manage. Even if a parent can only commit as a substitute, that can be a big help. Make sure all of the adults have each other’s contact information, and include people’s preferences and availability for chaperoning.
- Review the laws and rules for safe biking in your state and community as a group. Keep everyone on the same page.
- If your train is large (more than 4 children), agree on how the group will cross at intersections. With a longer train, it’s likely that the whole group may not be able to get through the intersection at the same time. Make sure there are enough adult engineers and cabooses if the group needs to split. Spacing adults strategically in the line may help this.
- If the difference in ages is significant for your riders, you may have two different trains that follow the same route. If you have enough adult volunteers to make this possible, it may be a good idea to break the larger train into smaller ones.
- Have a dress rehearsal with your bicycle train participants on a weekend afternoon. Make sure all participants (kids and adults) have the necessary equipment that they need. Teach kids how to check their bike before riding. Go over traffic safety rules. Try out the ride so the children get comfortable with the route. This is a great time to show parents who are not going to regularly participate in the train how the ride will go. Parents feel more comfortable leaving their children with adults they trust, and on a route that feels safe.
- If you choose to have multiple stops, check the students in on an attendance sheet. If you’re expecting a child who is not at the stop, call the parent’s cell phone to make sure they were not planning on joining you on the ride today.
- If you can, keep an online map, calendar or even a website for your bicycle train. It can be easier to keep members updated on any changes to the route, schedule or volunteers.

